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NIGERIAN POLITICAL FERMENT

ANNCR:

SOMETIME BETWEEN NOW AND THE FIRST OF OCTOBER, THE NIGERIAN FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT WILL ENACT THE NATION'S NEW CONSTITUTION AND SIMULTANEOUSLY LIFT THE TWELVE-YEAR OLD BAN ON PARTY POLITICS IN PREPARATION FOR A RETURN TO CIVILIAN RULE TWELVE MONTHS LATER. VOA'S WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT JOHN ROBERTS SENDS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM LAGOS.

NIGERIANS ARE AN INTENSELY POLITICAL-MINDED PEOPLE AND THE RESUMPTION OF ALL-OUT POLITICAL ACTIVITY AFTER TWELVE YEARS OF ENFORCED ABSTINENCE WILL BE LIKE LIFTING THE LID FROM A BOILING KETTLE. THEORETICALLY, THERE ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE ANY POLITICKING UNTIL THE BAN IS FORMALLY LIFTED. BUT UNDERNEATH, NIGERIA IS NOW IN A FERMENT OF SPECULATION AND JOCKEYING FOR POSITION FOR WHEN THAT DAY ARRIVES. THERE HAS BEEN A MUSHROOMING OF SO-CALLED SOCIAL CLUBS AND GROUPS WITH NAMES LIKE "CLUB NINETEEN", "THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT," "PROGRESSIVE FRONT", AND "THE COMMITTEE OF FRIENDS" -- THIS LAST ONE REFERRING TO FRIENDS OF CHIEF OBAFEMI AWALOWO PERHAPS THE MOST VISIBLE AND CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE OF THEM ALL. CHIEF AWALOWO WAS PRIME PRIME MINISTER OF THE FORMER WESTERN REGION IN THE ORIGINAL NIGERIAN FEDERATION AND UNLIKE MOST OTHER POLITICAL ASPIRANTS, HE SAYS FRANKLY HE WILL SEEK THE PRESIDENCY.

THERE ARE A LARGE NUMBER OF SO-CALLED OLD HANDS WHO HAVE BEEN BIDING THEIR TIME SINCE THE MILITARY TAKEOVER IN NINETEEN SIXTY SIX. BUT ALSO WAITING IN THE WINGS ARE MANY YOUNGER CONTENDERS KNOWN HERE AS THE "YOUNG TURKS," WHO BELIEVE THAT THE OLDER LEADERS HAD THEIR CHANCE AND FAILED AND THAT IT'S

NOW TIME TO GIVE THE YOUNGER GENERATION ITS TRY. ALL THIS PROMISES TO PROVIDE WHAT ONE AFRICAN MAGAZINE HAS DESCRIBED AS THE HOTTEST POLITICAL CONTEST THAT AFRICA HAS WITNESSED IN YEARS.

THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT IS WELL AWARE OF THE DANGERS INVOLVED IN THE RESUMPTION OF PARTY POLITICS. HEAD OF STATE, GENERAL OLUSEGUN OBASANJO, RECALLING THE SITUATION BEFORE THE MILITARY TAKEOVER, SPOKE RECENTLY OF "THE UNBRIDLED DEFIANCE OF ACCEPTED NORMS AND PRACTICES OF DEMOCRACY ON THE PART OF THE POLITICAL ELITE," AND WHAT HE CALLED THEIR TENDENCY TOWARDS TRIBAL POLARIZATION. IT IS THIS PROSPECT, A RECURRENCE OF TRIBAL AND REGIONAL DIVISIONS, WHICH MOST WORRIES THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT AND WHICH IT IS DETERMINED TO AVOID.

THE TASK OF MANAGING AND CONTROLLING THE PROCESSES UNLEASHED BY LIFTING THE BAN, AS GENERAL OBASANJO PUT IT, HAS BEEN PUT IN THE HANDS OF THE FEDERAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION, CALLED "FEDCO," UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF CHIEF MICHAEL ONEY. IT IS HIS UNENVIABLE TASK TO REGULATE THE CAMPAIGNING AND THE ELECTION AND TO ACT AS WATCHDOG DURING THE ENTIRE PROCESS. ON SEPTEMBER FIFTEENTH, LISTS OF THE FORTY-SEVEN-AND-ONE-HALF-MILLION REGISTERED VOTERS ARE TO BE DISPLAYED TO THE PUBLIC. ONE WEEK LATER, THERE WILL BE PUBLISHED A DELIMITATION OF THE COUNTRY INTO FEDERAL AND STATE CONSTITUENCIES AND SENATORIAL DISTRICTS. WHEN THE POLITICAL BAN IS LIFTED, HIS COMMISSION WILL BE IN CHARGE OF REGISTERING THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR PLATFORMS AND ISSUING LISTS OF THE CANDIDATES.

THE COMMISSION CAN REFUSE TO REORGNIZE PARTIES IF THEY APPEAR TO BE TOO REGIONAL OR TOO ETHNICALLY ORIENTED. AND, TO BE SUCCESSFUL, A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE MUST WIN ONLY NOT A

MAJORITY OF THE NATIONAL VOTE, HE MUST ALSO WIN AT LEAST ONE QUARTER OF THE VOTE IN TWO THIRDS OF ALL NINETEEN STATES. BUT AT THE MOMENT THE SCENE IS DOMINATED BY SECRET CAUCUSES AND INFORMAL LOBBYING AMONG A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS ARRAY OF GROUPS AND INTERESTS. (OPT) THIS REPORTER ASKED A THE WESTERN DIPLOMAT IF ANY PATTERN SEEMED TO BE EMERGING. THE DIPLOMAT THREW UP HIS HANDS AND SAID, "NOBODY KNOWS, THE SITUATION IS CHANGING DAY BY DAY. COALITIONS ARE FORMING, BREAKING UP AND REFORMING ALL THE TIME." RIGHT NOW, HE SAID," ITS ANYBODY'S GUESS." ONE THING IS CERTAIN, THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT IS GOING TO BE WATCHING THE SHOW WITH A STERN EYE. GENERAL OBASANJO HAS DELIVERED DIRE WARNINGS AGAINST NOT ONLY PREMATURE INDULGENCE IN PARTY POLITICS, BUT ALSO AGAINST CAMPAIGN ABUSES. HE SAID RECENTLY," LET ME WARN AGAINST THE TEMPTATION TO TEST THE GOVERNMENT DURING THIS TRANSITIONAL PERIOD. THE GOVERNMENT, HE SAID, WILL NOT TOLERATE ANY DISRUPTION OF ITS PROGRAM BY ANY INDIVIDUAL OR ANY GROUP FOR ANY REASON. (END OPT TO MANY OBSERVERS THE RESUMPTION OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN NIGERIA MAY WELL BE THE SEVEREST TEST SO FAR OF WHAT HAS BEEN CALLED NIGERIA'S REMARKABLY PRECISE AND WELL-THOUGHT-OUT PROGRAM TO RETURN THE NATION TO DEMOCRACY.

WJL/PY